

Child-care proposal earns praise; Program's principles lauded Liberals listened, advocates say [CA] ^[1]

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EXCERPTS

Child-care advocates are lauding the Liberals' \$5 billion child-care platform as a major step forward in their push for a national program.

Although the Liberals have broken campaign promises on child care in the past, advocates note that yesterday's pledge is different because it is centred on legislated principles and is not tied to provincial funding.

"It really does capture a lot of what we've all been saying for some time. We're all really pleased," said Martha Friendly of the University of Toronto's Childcare Resource and Research Unit.

The Liberals' 1993 Red Book promise to create 150,000 new child-care spaces depended on cost-sharing with the provinces, a condition many cash-strapped provincial governments couldn't meet and which the Liberals ultimately used as an excuse to do nothing.

The most significant component of the Liberal platform this time, advocates say, is Prime Minister Paul Martin's promise to enact legislation that would ensure federal child-care cash is spent on provincially regulated programs that are developmentally enriching, affordable to parents and available to all children.

Four legislated principles - what the Liberals are calling the "QUAD" - are the foundation of the proposed national system. They are:

Quality. Facilities must be provincially regulated to ensure safety and appropriate child-caregiver ratios.

Universality. Programs must be open to all preschool children including those with special needs.

Accessibility. Parents should be able to afford the programs.

Developmental. Programs must provide early learning and development along with care.

Previous federal fuzziness on what the provinces could call child care has allowed the country to develop the current patchwork of programs that vary widely in quality, advocates say.

"The part we're really optimistic about is that it's clear the Liberals have heard what child-care advocates have been asking for in terms of the principles," said Debra Mayer, incoming chair of the Child Care Advocacy Association of Canada.

But there's a huge difference between a party platform and creating a program, advocates say.

If implemented, the Liberal platform would build on last year's \$1 billion federal-provincial child-care agreement expected to roll out over five years.

While that agreement was seen as an important first step toward building a national child-care program, advocates said the funding was woefully inadequate.

Yesterday's promise of \$5 billion over five years, or about \$1 billion per year, has always been seen as a minimum requirement.

"We know that \$5 billion will not realize a comprehensive, universal system in five years. But it is enough to get started," said Maryann Bird, executive director of the Child Care Advocacy Association of Canada.

Friendly was equally optimistic. "If this moves ahead, then it will be a very big next step," she said yesterday.

Kira Heineck of the Ontario Coalition for Better Child Care says the program opens the door for provincial partnerships.

"If (the Liberals) win the election and this program is implemented, it could trigger even more investment in regulated child care," she said. "Of course we'll be calling on the province of Ontario to lead the way by matching federal dollars and working together on those principles."

- reprinted from the Toronto Star

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